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ABSTRACT

Aspects of a project designed to train senior citizens in child care (especially infant care) are described in this brief report. Eligibility and screening criteria, participant characteristics, instruction provided, program effectiveness, and placement of graduates are among the topics discussed. (Author/RH)

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Exploring Community Resources: Senior Citizens as Caregivers

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Today there is an increasing number of mothers working while their children are very young. In 1980, 40% of all mothers with children under age 6 were working, with indications that these numbers are steadily increasing. Moreover, 84% of all children whose mothers work, cannot be accommodated in government licensed day care centers. In addition, rather than increasing government funding for children's services, we find diminishing funds. Thus there is little question that child care and children's services are in great demand. In many communities, however, there is a shortage of day care facilities to meet this demand. The program I will describe focuses on one avenue to fill this critical need. Before continuing, I'd like to describe demographics of the community and its needs in setting the background for developing our project.

San Bernardino is the largest county in square miles in the country, but its population is sparsely distributed. The county includes a large expanse of desert with many small scattered poverty level communities. A large portion of the county's population is located in the city of San Bernardino,

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population 123,000, or in the surrounding metropolitan area. The area is considered economically depressed and unemployment figures are above state and country levels. Only in the past few years have the western sections of the county experienced increased housing and industrial growth. In 1977, just prior to beginning our project, the median county income was $5880; however, state income taxes reported a greatly increased mean income of $14,451. A large number of senior citizens and families on subsidized incomes, who do not pay state income taxes, contribute to the discrepancy in figures. In addition there are many retirement communities for senior citizens on limited or subsidized incomes. These individuals come to the area only upon retirment, do not contribute to its financial assets but, rather, require services. Low paying, industrial or clerical positions are common; most workers are employed in blue collar positions. Child care facilities are far from abundant, vary in quality, have few openings in standard or above-standard settings. Many parents of course cannot afford the price of preschool and are faced with the dilemma of what to do with their young while they are at work, especially when unemployment means no food, poverty and welfare. While there are some services for toddlers and preschoolers, facilities for infants are very scarce leaving parents with very few options for child care or with no job and little money. A county-wide survey of child care needs found that parents rely heavily on friends and relatives for

day care, in situations where supervision and stimulation, but not necessarily education, are available. Parents indicated that the high cost of child care is a major problem, most of them paying 30% more than they can actually afford. Thus, a background of ample need for our program.

The goal of the senior-infant caregiver project is to train senior citizens in child care, especially in infant care. The program was first developed in 1978, under the auspices of the Childrens' Services Task Force of the San Bernardino County Commission on the Status of Women. The purpose of the task force is to enhance child care provision, increase access to child care facilities, and improve the quality of care available. At this same time, the County Office on Aging was searching for an additional program to associate with their training project. The Office on Aging coordinates a senior employment project which trains or retrains senior citizens for employment in a variety of positions and job placements. These mutual needs formed a merger and joint goal: to train seniors in infant care. Thus the senior-infant caregiver program came to be funded through the County Office on Aging, a division of the California Department on Aging. The project is guided by an Advisory Board composed of representatives of the State College, local Community College, San Bernardino Resource and Referral Service, Office on Aging, and the Commission.

The basic Office on Aging eligibility criteria for

participation include age (55 or older), limited income, satisfactory health and a willingness to work. Potential applicants are recruited via newspaper advertisements and from applications to the senior employment project. Initially applicants are asked about interest in working with children; those expressing enthusiasm are interviewed by the advisory board.

The interview phase produces some interesting comments. Many women who applied children, many grandchildren and even some great-grandchildren. Some of them indicated that they had brought up 20 children altogether and now wanted a job based on the skills they had already acquired. We innocently asked about toilet training and weaning. For instance, we might ask what the applicant would do if the mother of a one-year old wanted the baby toilet-trained. Severl women were shocked: "Why wasn't that baby trained already? I trained mine at six months and that's the way it should be!", they said. The degree of their adamance and rigidity were factors in considering the applicant. Likewise willingness to hit a young child or leave babies alone were also notes listed in not enrolling an interviewee. Other applicants were quite eager to learn, take a course from the community college and be taught about activities they had done many years earlier without instruction. In fact, I will never forget one applicant, whom we readily accepted, who was 75 years old, had children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren,

but said "in the 50 years since I first had my young children and developed ideas about child care, I'm sure that there's been a lot found out about child care and child rearing and I'm excited to find out what those changes are and what we now say is best for the little ones. This will be a real challenge."

Let me now explain why I have been and will be referring to women as the participants. The program is open to both men and women. However, there are few men in the upper-age brackets to apply, very few have applied and many men upon questioning about the program by the Office on Aging, are not interested in working with children - an unfortunate attitude for them and the children. Two men were initially accepted into the program, one of whom wouldn't attend unless another male also enrolled; then the second male proved ineligible due to limitations on earning extra income imposed by SSI funding. Many working mothers are heads of households and many of their children have no familial male models. We had hoped that some men could be enrolled and then provide these much-needed male figures for the children. Additionally changes in sex role attitudes would seem to make the addition of males into day care programs an important step. Unfortunately for the program, the young children and the men themselves, we have yet to enroll a male trainee.

Each participant attends special classes led by an instructor in child care and child development from the

local community college. A minimum of college credits is given for the program. The program consists of 24 hours of classroom instruction over a 17 week period. In the classes, participants are taught about: a) nutrition - varying the growing infants' needs over the course of development, food preparation from basic food groups, the sugar versus no sugar debate; b) first aid - emergency treatment, resuscitation, sources of information such as poison control centers; c) child rearing information per se - attitudes and methods of discipline, toilet training, feeding, weaning - when, how and at whose intiative; and d) lastly, activities - changes in play styles and expectations across developmental periods, how to plan activities for young charges, making toys from ready-available and free materials, tailoring children's activities to their social and cognitive development including suggestions for enrichment. The activities section is the traditionally academic section and includes information and theory based on psychological research or "how we know what we know."

In addition to the academic or lecture/film/demonstration instruction portion, the participants also receive on-site instruction and supervision in child-care settings. Members of the advisory board survey potential infant care settings and recommend training facilities. Sites are chosen on the basis of satisfying state requirements, providing qualified and capable care, willingness by directors/teachers

to actually supervise and evaluate the participants regularly. Further, only programs with well developed curricula for education, cognitive and social development, and not just mass play are selected. The program extends for 17 weeks and participants work on-site for 20 hours per week. During this period they are paid by the Senior Employment Project at a figure upwards of $3.50/hour. During the last few weeks of the project job placement for the participants is sought by the contracting agency and interviews are arranged. One critical but realistic aspect repeatedly discussed during the program and in screening applicants is that upon completion, it is likely that the wage the graduates will earn my be significantly less than that during training. A strong hesitation on this subject or dire need for money has often been a cue to later placement problems which plague the project.

To date four program cycles or courses have been completed and applicants for the fifth are being interviewed at the present time. Approximately 60% of the graduates have been placed within two weeks after completing the course. Some of the graduates have not been placed due to health reasons, or have moved out of state, and should not be counted in the numbers of graduates not-placed. Graduates receive a certificate of completion from the Department of Health regarding their knowledge of first-aid and a certificate of completion from the Commission. Placement openings and

followup are handled by a coordinator from the Senior Employment Project. Ideally many of the women wish to work in preschool or infant care centers with many children and other adults for companionship. However, in reality this area afford few such opportunities and pay minimal wages when available. A few of the graduates have been hired by Church-related centers. A majority of the placements, however, have been in the working parents' private residences, some full-time and some part-time usually at $1.50 - $2.25 per hour. Obviously the factory worker making just above minimum wage cannot pay minimum wage and so many of the graduates work for traditional babysitting wages but if employed full-time feel that the total income and satisfaction gained are sufficient. None of the graduates at this time have applied to be licensec day care providers themselves although in California licensing is now a moot point. Turnovers in jobs are common due to the employers' own layoffs and lack of money.

Let me now discuss problems in placement of the graduates, why aren't they all employed all the time? First, where? As I indicated earlier, placements in full-time center jobs are few and some graduates seek employment as much for companionship as for money. Second, for what pay? Child care providers are among the lowest paid personnel in the country and this is especially true in an economically depressed area where parents work just to make ends meet. Third, a possible

issue of ageism. As part of our county needs assessment survey mentioned earlier, we asked about the best age for child care providers and which ages were unacceptable. The senior citizens who graduate from our program are often above the age that parents want to employ as care providers! Parents felt that care providers should be between ages 17 - 64; many cited maturity as an important factor in hiring a worker. Health considerations however we mentioned and this might reflect the disinclination to hire the older worker. Additionally, about one-fifth of the children do not see an older person frequently (less than once a month). To some degree parents want children to have exposure to older people but even the certification of completion doesn't always increase trust; in fact, the parents surveyed noted that love and affection is more critical than child care training.

Other programs exist in the state and across the country in which senior citizens interact with children but there are several crucial differences. First, most other programs are volunteer projects involving no financial commitment by the organizing agency or the parents. Second, other programs usually occupy a small portion of the child and adults' time and provide, thirdly, a different kind of service. Parents who seek out Project Caress in Southern California, or the Foster Grandparent Program across the country, may not need the services of full-time child care providers, but recognize the importance of the senior person

or surrogate grandparent in their children's lives. However, the graduates of the Senior-infant caregiver project are not only kind loving older persons who serve as surrogate grandparents, but also provide necessary child care services while parents work. Parents may feel that a few hours of grandma or grandpa are fine but must revise their views about day care in order to accept full-time non-familial senior care providers.

A fourth explanation regarding placement has been our emphasis on infant care. Many parents, despite financial hardships, choose to wait until children are two years old before mother returns to work and thus the infant portion of our program is insufficient for many potential parent employers. There is the practical notion also that infants grow up to be, well, toddlers. One expansion we will institute with the next course is training for supervision of toddlers and preschoolers as well. This new strategy will allow parents to make long-term arrangements and provide continuity of care.

This brings us to the question of benefits - to whom? Obviously to the parents whose children are receiving care, since they may now work full-time or part-time, earn money, and know that their children are well supervised, cared for by caring people and can afford to buy some extras for their families. For the children, the care provided is by individuals who know about their needs from day to

day, about child development, and also love children - people who will in some senses 'babysit', but also enhance the youngster's development and become cherished surrogate grandparents. The parents' employers also benefit since reliable child care providers cut down on employee absenteeism and distraction due to worry. In fact, according to data from our needs assessment survey, 2/3 of the parents say that lack of reliable child care has led, at times, to having to take time off from work, increases in absenteeism; 1/2 of the respondants also said that child care problems have been obstacles in finding employment.

The senior-infant caregiver program has made an impact. Coupled with a county-wide child care resource and referral project, San Bernardino County has made a start toward furnishing much-needed avenues of child care provision. Alone this will not alleviate total economic depression, but may enable some parents to work, some senior citizens to earn more money and feel loved and needed, and some children to receive additional care and attention from adults.

Generally those interested in child development, and other specialists concerned about children's welfare, have been aghast at government cutbacks and the history of budget cutting meaning children's services first. The recent changes in fiscal planning and tax structures by the present national administration create an even stronger case for programs such as the senior-infant caregiver project and for

placement openings. Prior to the present time there were many restrictions on supplemental income beyond government subsidy. If these are removed or minimized, additional participants may be found who meet the Office on Aging criteria and want to work with children. In addition the loss of funding by centers creates increased demand for qualified senior caregivers working in parents' homes or centers. It is exceedingly unfortunate that at the present time child care budgets and services for children are being slashed - but that forces us to be creative and look within our communities for additional avenues and resources for children's services and child care. Other community explorations being considered involve employer-based on-site centers. This idea received overwhelming support (75% would support it) in our survey. Perhaps such centers could be staffed, at least in part, by senior citizens. Further, private corporations may now receive tax advantages for creating these benefits for employees. The time to seek out innovative solutions and provide excellent care has arrived. The need is felt by employers, parents, senior citizens and children alike. We think the senior-infant caregive program is one such inexpensive and worthwhile possibility to consider within our communities.

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